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THE NAG HAMMADI LIBRARY AND THE HERESIOLOGISTS

BY

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The discovery of a large collection of Gnostic writings,[1] far from having solved some of the problems concerning the Gnostic phenomenon, appears to have multiplied them. Before the Nag Hammadi find, scholars were almost completely dependent on the heresiologists for their knowledge of Gnostic sects and teachings. Even much of the primary material such as the Epistle of Ptolemy to Flora[2] and the Naassene Hymn[3] we owe to the Church Fathers' liberal policy of quoting extensive excerpts from the heretical material available to them.

Three Gnostic manuscripts had been found in Egypt before the Nag Hammadi Library came to light. These are the Codex Askewianus,[4] the Codex Brucianus[5] and the Codex Berolinensis 8502.[6] The first two have been known for two centuries but the best known parts, the two Books of *Pistis Sophia*, are so bizarre and esoteric that, had they been typical of Gnosticism, it could never have been the threat to the church which the orthodox Fathers claimed it to be. The tendency has been to consider these works a decadent or aberrant form of Gnosticism,[7] perhaps coming

[1] For an account of the discovery see Jean Doresse, *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics: An Introduction to the Gnostic Coptic Manuscripts discovered at Chenoboskion* (London 1960) pp. 116–136. For recent reports on the present state of Nag Hammadi studies see J. M. Robinson, The Coptic Gnostic Library Today, *N.T.S.* 14 (1968) 356–401, and K. Rudolph, Gnosis und Gnostizismus, ein Forschungsbericht, *Theologische Rundschau*, n.F. 34 (1969) 121–175 and 181–231.

[2] Epiphanius, *Panarion* xxxiii,3–7.

[3] Hippolytus, *Refutatio* V,10,2.

[4] Carl Schmidt, *Pistis Sophia* (Copenhagen 1925).

[5] Carl Schmidt, *Gnostische Schriften in koptischer Sprache aus dem Codex Brucianus* (Leipzig 1892) and Charlotte A. Baynes, *A Coptic Gnostic Treatise contained in the Codex Brucianus* (Cambridge 1933). A German translation of Codex Askewianus and Codex Brucianus has been published by Carl Schmidt, *Koptisch-gnostische Schriften*, I: *Die Pistis-Sophia, Die beiden Bücher des Jeu, Unbekanntes altgnostisches Werk*, 3rd ed. by Walter C. Till (Berlin 1962).

[6] Walter C. Till, *Die gnostischen Schriften des koptischen Papyrus Berolinensis 8502* (Berlin 1955) and Carl Schmidt, *Die alten Petrusakten im Zusammenhang der apocryphen Apostelliteratur nebst einem neuentdeckten Fragment untersucht* (Leipzig 1903).

[7] Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion* (Boston 1963) p. 40.

from a time when the church had won the battle against Gnosticism and had isolated the remaining pockets.

Codex Berolinensis 8502 is of a different character and it would have stimulated a new look at the evidence presented by the heresiologists had not various mishaps and two world wars delayed its publication. The report by Carl Schmidt in 1907 on Irenaeus and his sources in *Adv. haer.* I,29[8] already indicated that one of the tractates in 8502, the Apocryphon of John, had finally given us a place where the accuracy and method of the earliest of the great heresiologists could be tested. However, the full text and translation of 8502 did not become available until 1955 and was soon overshadowed by the first publications from the Nag Hammadi find, the Gospel of Truth,[9] and the Gospel of Thomas.[10] With such important new material available, and more in the offing, a full evaluation of the Codex Berolinensis was postponed.

One effect of the advance report by Carl Schmidt was that the evidence of the Fathers was no longer thought to be automatically suspect. Ever since the rise of critical historical scholarship the heresiologists' description of their opponents' teachings had been considered to be of dubious value. This was not simply due to a 19th century anti-theological bias and sympathy for the heretical underdog, but was based on the polemical nature of the heresiological writings. Eugène de Faye, the great student of Gnosticism from the early part of this century, represents this attitude. He completely discounts the value of the reports of the Church Fathers except when they are giving information about sects of their own time with which they had had contact. He advocates that the early history of the sects should be ignored unless we have corroboration from authentic remnants of Gnostic writings.[11]

To be sure, the evidence presented by the heresiologists does not inspire the present-day historian to great confidence. If the reports agree it is usually due to the dependence of the one Father on the other. Clearly Hippolytus, Epiphanius, and the later heresiologists did not have in-

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[8] Irenaeus und seine Quelle in *adv. haer.* 1,29, *Philotesia. Paul Kleinert zum LXX Geburtstag dargebracht* (Berlin 1907) pp. 315–336.

[9] *Evangelium Veritatis*, by M. Malinine, H.-Ch. Puech, G. Quispel (Zurich 1956) and *Supplementum* to *Evangelium Veritatis*, by M. Malinine, H.-Ch. Puech, G. Quispel, and W. Till (Zurich and Stuttgart 1961).

[10] *The Gospel according to Thomas*, by A. Guillaumont, H.-Ch. Puech, G. Quispel, W. Till and Yassah 'Abd al Masih (Leiden, London and New York 1959).

[11] Eugène de Faye, *Gnostiques et Gnosticisme* (Paris 1925) p. 335f.

dependent knowledge of most sects. For these they depended on Irenaeus and each other. Thus an original mistake or distortion took on the appearance of well-attested truth. Where the heresiologists appear to have independent accounts there are inexplicable and most improbable disagreements in their descriptions of the same sect.[12] Most damaging, however, is that the Fathers had a special axe to grind in their accounts. They were overly eager to prove that the heretics did not derive their doctrines from Scripture or the apostolic tradition but rather from pagan sources such as Greek philosophy, oriental cults, or the arch-heretic Simon Magus.[13] To prove such a point, a passionate polemicist, even if he was a saintly bishop, would not be above playing fast and loose with the evidence.

Today the evidence of the Fathers is taken more seriously again, even to the point of becoming uncritical. Sagnard is a representative of this new attitude although he is still very cautious about the information of sects with which the heresiologists did not have direct contact. At least concerning Irenaeus he is willing to claim that he can be completely trusted when he reports on Gnostics with whom he had personal contact.[14]

However, the Coptic Gnostic Library from Nag Hammadi has raised new questions about the accuracy and value of the reports of the Fathers. Between the heresiological accounts and the holy books of the Gnostics there are major discrepancies which beg for an explanation. There is, first of all, the lack of a significant overlapping in material and detail. Certainly with the great variety of books in the Nag Hammadi Library one might expect to have located many of the sources which were directly or indirectly responsible for the reports of the heresiologists. Yet presently only five cases of clear agreement have been found and of these three

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[12] A good example is provided in the accounts of the Basilidean system by Irenaeus in *Adv. haer.* I,24,3–7, Hippolytus in *Refutatio* VII,20–27, and Clement of Alexandria in *Stromata* IV,12 *et al.* It is impossible to reconcile these different descriptions. The tendency is to prefer Hippolytus' longer and more philosophical account. Cf. P. Hendrix, *De Alexandrijnsche Haeresiarch Basilides* (Amsterdam 1926), G. Quispel, L'homme gnostique (La doctrine de Basilide), *Eranos Jahrbücher*, 16 (1948) pp. 89–139, J.H. Waszink's article "Basilides", in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, I,1217–25, and W. Foerster, Das System des Basilides, *NTS* 9 (1962–63) 233–255.

[13] Hippolytus tried to prove that all the heresies sprang from Greek philosophy, the mystery cults, or astrology (*Refutatio* I, preface 8–9). Irenaeus believed that all of the heresies developed from Simon the Samaritan (*Adv. haer.* I,23,2). In this he follows his predecessor Justin Martyr (*Apology* I,26).

[14] F.M. Sagnard, *La gnose valentinienne et le témoignage de saint-Irenée* (Paris 1947) p. 100.

involve only a small amount of text.[15] The agreement between the Apocryphon of John and Irenaeus' account of the Barbelo-Gnostics still remains the clearest and most extensive instance of common material. It is noteworthy also that in spite of the late date of the Library the agreements are mainly with Irenaeus, the earliest of the great heresiologists.[16]

References to the heresiarchs and their disciples, which dominate the accounts of the Church Fathers, are conspicuously absent from the Nag Hammadi Library. Only in a few poorly preserved pages of Codex IX do we find mention of Valentinus and his disciples, and Isidorus the Son of Basilides (IX 56–59). Although lacunae obscure much of the argument, it is clear that the heresiarchs are accused of causing schisms and of expounding contradictory views about marriage.[17] Since the tractate to which this passage belongs is itself far from orthodox, its author must have lifted the passage from a heresiological work with little concern for the fact that it was meant to expose and refute some of his spiritual ancestors.[18]

The second discrepancy concerns the names and descriptions of the Gnostic sects. The heresiologists define the sects in terms of certain characteristic traits or distinctive teachings. Although they claim an inner connection between the different heresies, as with the heads of the hydra,[19] the effect of their accounts of the Gnostic tenets is that the sects appear to have widely diverged from each other in doctrine, and were subject to rapid change. Irenaeus may claim that all heresies sprang from Simon Magus; the fact is that he does not even present a believable transition in

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[15] Cf. *infra* pp. 217f. and note 45. No mention will be made here of the few cases where the Church Fathers show familiarity with material found in the Gospel of Truth, the Gospel of Thomas, and the Gospel of Philip. These have been sufficiently discussed in the introductions and commentaries to these tractates.

[16] The present consensus is that the Library was buried early in the fifth century. Cf. J.M.Robinson, The Coptic Gnostic Library Today, 370–72. There appears to be a datable reference in the Concept of Our Great Power (VI,4). In connection with a warning against evil lusts and desires the Anomoeans are mentioned and characterized as "evil heresies which have no basis" (VI 40,7–9). The Anomoean controversy arose in the second half of the fourth century. Leaving enough time for a Greek tractate to be disseminated and translated into Coptic, we arrive at a *terminus a quo* of the early fifth century.

[17] This is reminiscent of Clement of Alexandria's discussion of marriage among the Gnostics in *Stromata* III.

[18] The Gnostics saw no problem in making extensive use of such apparently hostile literature as the Old Testament. Codex VII places among Gnostic tractates the Teaching of Silvanus which unambiguously and elaborately speaks of the creator God as the only true One. It defines the unity of God (VII 99,31–101,10) in the same words used by Irenaeus in *Adv.haer.* II,1 to refute the Gnostic view of God.

[19] Hippolytus, *Refutatio* V,11.

teaching between Simon and his disciple Menander,[20] leave alone the other heresiarchs and sects. The overall picture derived from the heresiologists is that each sect had developed, from whatever source, its own distinct set of doctrines.

The evidence from the Nag Hammadi Library runs counter to this picture. Not only does the collection itself show an amazing variety of writings but also individual tractates place together opinions and myths which, according to the heresiologists, belonged to different sects.[21] If the traditional categories are left unchallenged, the Library appears to contain Valentinian, Barbelo-Gnostic, Sethian, Basilidean and Hermetic writings.[22] In addition there are a number of Gnostic tractates, like the Gospel of Thomas, which defy any kind of classification in terms of sects described by the opponents of Gnosticism.[23] An even more interesting

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[20] Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* I,23,2–5.

[21] Cf. *infra*, p. 219f.

[22] No claim is made that these classifications are definitive, complete, or that the author accepts them as correct, except in the case of the Hermetic tractates.

Valentinian:	I,*2* and XII,*2*: The Gospel of Truth.
	I,*3*: The Treatise on the Resurrection.
	I,*4*: The Tripartite Tractate.
	II,*3*: The Gospel of Philip.
	V,*3*: The First Apocalypse of James.
	XI,*2*: Jesus the Demiurge.
Barbelo-Gnostic:	II,*1*; III,*1*; IV,*1*: The Apocryphon of John.
or Sethian	II,*4*: The Hypostasis of the Archons.
	III,*2* and IV,*2*: The Gospel of the Egyptians.
	III,*3* and V, *1*: Eugnostos, the Blessed.
	III,*4*: The Sophia of Jesus Christ.
	VII,*1*: The Paraphrase of Shem.
	VII,*5*: The Three Steles of Seth.
	VIII,*1*: Zostrianos.
	VIII,*2*: The Letter of Peter to Philip.
	IX,*1*: Melchizedek.
	IX,*2*: The Thought of Norea.
	XI,*3*: The Allogenes.
	XIII,*1*: Discourse on the Three Appearances.
Basilidean:	VII,*2*: The Second Treatise of the Great Seth.
Hermetic:	VI,*6*: The Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth.
	VI,*7*: The Prayer of Thanksgiving.
	VI,*8*: The Apocalypse from Asclepius.

[23] In addition to the Gospel of Thomas (II,*2*) we could mention On the Origin of the World (II,*5*), The Dialogue of the Savior (III,*5*), The Apocalypse of Paul (V,*2*), The Second Apocalypse of James (V,*4*), The Apocalypse of Adam (V,*5*), The Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles (VI,*1*) and the Concept of Our Great Power (VI,*4*). The membership of this group will certainly increase after the tractates will have been studied in greater detail.

group – for our purpose – are tractates like the Apocryphon of James (I,*1*), the Exegesis on the Soul (II,*6*), the Book of Thomas the Contender (II,*7*), the Thunder: Perfect Mind (VI,*2*) and Authentic Teaching (VI,*3*) which hardly deserve to be called Gnostic.[24] The Teaching of Silvanus (VII,*4*) is at least as orthodox as Clement of Alexandria and might have delighted the heresiologists. Finally we find among these esoteric Gnostic tractates the Sentences of Sextus (XII,*1*) which are non-Gnostic, Hellenistic wisdom sayings!

More serious than the confusing picture offered by the Library as a whole is the vulnerability of the classifications which have been made up to now. What permits us to call one piece of ancient literature Valentinian and another Sethian? Are the presence of some Valentinian formulae in the First Apocalypse of James (V,*3*) sufficient to warrant the label Valentinian for the tractate as a whole?[25] Is the Pharaphrase of Shem (VII,*1*) Sethian simply because Hippolytus appears to have based his account of the Sethian teachings on it?[26]

It is not the unclassifiable or marginally Gnostic tractates that threaten the traditional categories of the heresiologists most but precisely those Nag Hammadi writings which share common material with the reports of the Church Fathers. There is indeed justification for calling certain tractates Valentinian[27] but can Valentinianism, as scholars have reconstructed it, survive this sudden increase in primary sources material? It is possible to explain some of the shocking differences among Valentinian writings as being due to different schools, or as early over against late and degenerate, or as marginal or extreme over against "orthodox", but the truth is that we have no sure way to make such judgments. The result will be that the whole phenomenon will have become blurred to the point that almost anything Gnostic can be called Valentinian.

The problem is just as great when we possess the source of the Church Father's description. The Barbelo-Gnostic sect appeared to have well-defined limits until Schmidt's discovery of the Gnostic source of Irenaeus' account in *Adv. haer.* I,29 made it a part of an amorphous whole. Not only is the Apocryphon of John much more ambiguous and complex than Irenaeus intimates, but it has in its orbit a large number of loosely related tractates[27a] which among each other represent enough Gnostic

[24] This does not mean that these tractates could not be read in a Gnostic way.
[25] Cf. *infra*, note 45.
[26] Cf. *infra*, p. 219.
[27] Cf. the list in note 22.
[27a] Cf. the list in note 22.

views to explode any kind of categorization based on distinctive teachings.

The prior question which needs to be asked is what standards the heresiologists had for naming the sects and identifying their teaching. Did they use a name current among the adherents, or did they supply names which seemed apt to them either in terms of the legendary founder of the sect, or the mythological author of their holy books, or even a prominent figure in their mythology? It is significant that Hippolytus reports that the Naassenes called themselves Gnostics.[28] This affirms our suspicion that the heretics used the self-designations "Gnostics" or "Christians",[29] nomenclature which the defenders of orthodoxy expressly set out to deny them. That would explain why Hippolytus stubbornly continues to call Gnostics Naassenes, and why the original title of Irenaeus' *Adv. haer.* according to Eusebius, is "Refutation and Overthrow of Gnosis Falsely So Called" (περὶ ἐλέγχου καὶ ἀνατροπῆς τῆς ψευδωνύμου γνώσεως).[30] Clement of Alexandria's explanation of the names of the Gnostic sects (*Stromata* VII,108,1–2) leaves no doubt that these names did not originate with the sects themselves. In order to discover the standards used by the heresiologists for classifying the opinions of the heretics, it is necessary to survey briefly their approach and sources. It is sufficient to limit ourselves to Irenaeus, since his is the earliest surviving anti-Gnostic work, and it sets the pattern for all later heresiologists.

It may seem to be saying the obvious, but Ireneaus did not set out to expose and refute Gnosticism but only heretics. They needed to be refuted because they deceived orthodox Christians by claiming that they possessed the true Christian Gnosis.[31] Irenaeus was not interested in non-Christian or marginally Christian Gnostic sects. His writings do not claim to present us with a comprehensive picture of second century Gnosticism as many interpreters have assumed, even up to the present day. Gnosticism, which appeared as a wolf in sheep's clothing, may not have comprised more than a small segment of the total movement; the *Adv. haer.* does not tell us. What is clear is that Irenaeus' overriding concern

[28] *Refutatio* V,11. Epiphanius had personal contact with a sect called Gnostics. *Panarion* xxvi,1.

[29] Cf. Hippolytus, *Refutatio* V,9,22 and Justin Martyr, *Apology* I,26.

[30] *Hist.eccl.* V,7. See also *Adv. haer.* II preface. The phrase "knowledge falsely so called" is taken from I Tim. VI,20. A full discussion of the use of the term "Gnostics" among the earliest heresiologists is presented by R. A. Lipsius in *Die Quellen der ältesten Ketzergeschichte* (Leipzig 1875) pp. 191–225.

[31] *Adv.haer.* I, preface.

was to expose and refute the Valentinians of his own time. It is only in the process of accomplishing this task that he introduces other heresiarchs and sects.

Irenaeus identified two types of primary sources in the preface to his book. He claims to be familiar with "the commentaries (ὑπομνήματα) of the disciples of Valentinus" and, secondly, he has "conversed with some of them".[31a] This personal contact must refer to Marcus the magician and his followers for Irenaeus gives a vivid description of the troubles this sect caused in his own district of the Rhone, especially among women.[32] The ὑπομνήματα – in Latin *commentarii* – normally do not refer to holy books but to notes, written reports or tracts.[33] These must be the basis for the long section dealing with the teachings of the disciples of Ptolemaeus (*Adv. haer.* I,1–8). The second major section concerns the teachings of the Marcosians (*Adv. haer.* I,13–21). Its vivid detail and unusual length are adequately explained by the first-hand experience of Irenaeus with this group. Together these two sections comprise fully two-thirds of Book I.

The remaining third of Book I contains three types of material. There are, first of all, two transitionary chapters (I,9–10) and the conclusion to Book I (31,3–4), which clearly were composed by Irenaeus himself. They play an important role in the structure of Book I for they explain why Irenaeus included heresiarchs and sects other than the disciples of Valentinus, the heretics who presented the immediate threat to the church. Basically two reasons are given which are not kept completely distinct. By exposing the variety and inconsistency in the teaching of Valentinus and his followers Irenaeus can draw a sharp contrast with the unity in doctrine of the Catholic Church throughout the world. He identifies unity with truth and variety with falsehood (I,9,5 and I,10). The differences among the Valentinians are presented mainly in chapters 11 and 12.[34]

The conclusion to Book I states the second reason for introducing non-Valentinian sects. The heretics listed in I,23–31,2 are considered to be the "mothers, fathers, and ancestors" of the disciples of Valentinus. The close connection between Irenaeus' contemporary Gnostic adversaries and the heretics of the past intends to prove that the Valentinians have deviated

[31a] *Adv.haer.* I, preface.

[32] *Adv.haer.* I,13,7.

[33] F.J.Foakes Jackson and K.Lake, *The Beginnings of Christianity*, Vol. II (London 1922) p. 9.

[34] The section on Marcus the Magician which follows (I,13–21) is, among other things, meant as a further example of the disagreements in teaching among the disciples of Valentinus (cf. I,21,5).

from the truth from the beginning and can make no claim to the apostolic tradition. *Adv.haer.* I,22 appears to be another transitionary chapter, yet it reads more like the introduction to a different heresiological work which traces Gnostic heresy from Simon through Tatian. While the preface to Book I had only the Valentinian school in view, this chapter sets as its purpose the refutation of all heretics. This suggests that Irenaeus is making use of an earlier heresiological work which he has made to serve his purpose of refuting the disciples of Valentinus.

There has long been a consensus that Irenaeus in *Adv.haer.* I used a catalogue of heresies as a source, although the exact content of this source and the identity of its author have remained uncertain. R.A. Lipsius was the first to argue that Irenaeus had incorporated the lost *Syntagma* of Justin Martyr.[35] A. von Harnack agreed with this conclusion but came up with a different reconstruction of the source.[36] This led to a new look at the issue by Lipsius who now considered it more likely that Irenaeus used a more recent heresiological source which had incorporated Justin's catalogue of heresies but expanded it, and perhaps changed its order.[37]

The interest in reconstructing Justin's *Syntagma* has confused the problem of Irenaeus' sources. The chapters describing heretics, apart from the extensive discussions of the teachings of the Ptolemaeans and Marcosians, mentioned above, fall readily into two groups. The first group is made up of the "Simon through Tatian" section (I,23–28) but also includes chapters 11 and 12. In general, the descriptions of the heresiarchs and sects in this section prove to be very brief and far from lucid. The reason for the obscure treatment is not so much the complexity of the Gnostic systems as the fact that the accounts appear to be a strange mixture of hearsay, heresiological speculation, and bits of information which may have come from Gnostic books. We seldom get a comprehensive picture of the teaching of the heresiarch or sect in question. It is the greater part of this section which has been considered to be identical with Justin's *Syntagma.*

Already Lipsius had suggested that the very brief section on Valentinus (I,11,1) must have been lifted out of the catalogue of heresies (I,23–28) by Irenaeus for use at a more appropriate place.[38] G. Heinrici, on the

[35] *Zur Quellenkritik des Epiphanius* (Vienna 1865).

[36] *Zur Quellenkritik der Geschichte des Gnosticismus* (Leipzig 1873).

[37] *Die Quellen der ältesten Ketzergeschichte* (Leipzig 1875) pp. 36–64. D.A. Hilgenfeld in *Die Ketzergeschichte des Urchristenthums* remained convinced that Justin's original work was imbedded in the *Adv.haer.* I; cf. pp. 6f. and 46–58.

[38] *Quellenkritik*, p. 159.

basis of the nature of the material, proposed that the whole of I,11–12 once belonged to the catalogue.[39] This correct observation immediately raises questions about Justin as the author of the source. Since Justin must have written the *Syntagma* around the year 145 he could hardly have known anything about the Ptolemaeans (I,12), heretics which were contemporaries of Irenaeus at the time that he wrote the *Adv.haer.* The same is true of I,28 which describes the Encratites, Tatian, and some libertine followers of Basilides and Carpocrates. From the way the sects are introduced, the very artificial connections with the heresiarchs which were described earlier, and the reference to Justin's martyrdom, it follows that this chapter is a later addition. Lipsius and Harnack have also convincingly argued that the reports on Marcellina (I,25,6), the Ebionites (I,26,2), and the Nicolaitanes (I,26,3) were added to Justin's catalogue. In addition Harnack claims that the sections on Carpocrates, Cerinthus and Cerdo could not have come from Justin's hand.

It is clear that a strict adherence to the Justin hypothesis leads to a proliferation of sources. If Irenaeus added all this material to Justin's catalogue of heresies what was his source and what his purpose? We have already seen that Irenaeus does not mention any Gnostic sources beyond the Valentinian School in the preface to Book I, and his purpose is limited to the refutation of the disciples of Valentinus. There is no convincing reason why Irenaeus would have added the Ebionites, the Nicolaitanes, and other groups to Justin's catalogue. This brings us to Lipsius' solution that Irenaeus did not use Justin's *Syntagma* but a later and more up-to-date catalogue of heresies. Strong support for this solution is found in the section on the Ptolemaeans (I,12,1) which forms a doublet with I,1–8. Chapter 12 shows no awareness that the Ptolemaeans have just been treated in detail in eight lengthy chapters.[40] The several significant differences between the accounts[41] indicate that Irenaeus in I,12,1 was not dependent on his Gnostic source but on an earlier heresiological work.

Thus far the evidence points to the use of only one heresiological source by Irenaeus, a catalogue of heretics running from Simon through Tatian which included sections on Valentinus and several of his disciples. Irenaeus adapted this catalogue to serve two purposes in refuting the

[39] *Die valentinianische Gnosis und die heilige schrift* (Leipzig 1871) p. 40.

[40] *Adv.haer.* I,1–8 do not specifically refer to the disciples of Ptolemaeus but it is implied in the preface to Book I that this school is being discussed.

[41] For example in I,12,1 Nous is produced by Thelesis while in I,1,1, by Ennoia-Sige.

disciples of Valentinus.[42] The one was to expose the inconsistency and diversity of opinions among Valentinus and his followers, the other was to prove that they had descended from a long line of heretics beginning with the satanic figure of Simon Magus.

The last three chapters of Book I (29–31,2) still need to be considered. They clearly stand apart from the Simon through Tatian section. There is a definite break between I,28 and I,29. Chapter 28 ends the list of Simonians and mentions, in exasperation, that it is no use to continue for "there is no end to them who in one way or other have fallen away from the truth". To all appearances no further reports on Gnostic sects are expected. Yet I,29 again picks up the task of exposing heretics, although this time they are no longer Simonians but "Gnostics" who have come "like mushrooms out of the ground". If Irenaeus is responsible for the description of these Gnostics, then it is difficult to account for the fact that he did not mention the Gnostic tractate, the Apocryphon of John, on which I,29 is based in its entirety. Also I,30 must have been based on a Gnostic holy book[43] without acknowledging it. This suggests that Irenaeus was dependent on a heresiological source which did not tell him the names of the sects involved nor that the accounts were based on authentic Gnostic books. In the final chapter (*Adv.haer.* I,31,1–2) his source had lost interest in quoting extensively from the Gnostic tractates which it had available but rather mentions one by name, the Gospel of Judas, and refers to a "collection of their writings in which they advocate to do away with the works of Hystera".[44]

The question remains whether *Adv.haer.* I,29–31,2 could have come from the same source as the Simon through Tatian section. It should be noted that these chapters do not fit the purpose of Justin's catalogue which culminated with Marcion, or Irenaeus' preoccupation with the disciples of Valentinus. I,29,1 specifically mentions that these Gnostics came from a root different from that of the descendants of Simon. Yet we have seen that Justin's *Syntagma* had been adapted before Irenaeus' time to serve the purpose of a catalogue of *all* heresies. Chapters 29–31,2 must have been added by a person with a similar interest who had some good Gnostic sources available to him.

[42] The several polemical excursuses, such as I,11,4 and 12,2, most likely were added by Irenaeus.

[43] Cf. *infra*, p. 218.

[44] Since Irenaeus in the preface to *Adv.haer.* I refers only to the "commentaries" of the disciples of Valentinus, the first person singular in I,31,1 must have been copied from his source.

In view of the preceding, the conclusion appears warranted that Irenaeus' first-hand knowledge of Gnostic teaching was limited to the disciples of Ptolemaeus and Marcus. The character of this first-hand material deserves to be specified. The Gnostic source presents first the cosmogony and other speculations, which prove to be basically non-Christian. Next, the claim is made that these teachings are derived from Scripture through an allegorical interpretation. This is precisely what one would expect the Gnostic propagandist to do in his effort to win souls from the Catholic Church. Thus in Irenaeus' account of the disciples of Valentinus we do not see the sects from the inside but from the outside, as they want to appear in their missionary effort. When we subtract the Scriptural prooftexts, we are left with a system which could hardly have been derived from Christian teachings. It would not have drawn the ire of Irenaeus had it not claimed to be the true interpretation of Scripture.

Several conclusions relevant to our discussion can be drawn from this situation. For the first-hand material which comprises two-thirds of *Adv. haer.* Book I, Irenaeus must not have had Gnostic holy books available but something like Gnostic missionary preaching either in oral or written form.[45] This explains why we find nothing like it in the Nag Hammadi Library which is largely made up of Gnostic holy books meant only for internal consumption. Only one Nag Hammadi tractate approximates the form of the material found in the first two-thirds of *Adv.haer.* I.[46] This is the Exegesis on the Soul (II,*6*), a well-sustained treatise on the fall of the soul, her repentance and spiritual wedding to the heavenly savior, which has scriptural and Homeric prooftexts effectively interspersed in the narrative.[47] Yet nothing approaching the distortions of Scripture reported by the Fathers is found in this tractate and an unsuspicious bishop of the Church might well have approved of its teachings.

Secondly, it is now possible to explain why the Gnostic tractates from Nag Hammadi are either much more or much less Christian than the reports of the Fathers would indicate. The Gnostic holy books normally did not include the crude identifications with Christian doctrines and prooftexts, and thus appear to us non-Christian or only marginally

[45] The First Apocalypse of James (V,*3*) preserves two formulas (33,22–24,4) also found in *Adv.haer.* I,21,5. Since these were used by the Marcosians as part of an "extreme unction" ritual, Irenaeus most likely received this information from eye witnesses rather than Gnostic writings.

[46] Material of a similar nature is found in Hippolytus, *Refutatio* V.

[47] Cf. W.C.Robinson, Jr., The Exegesis on the Soul, *Novum Testamentum* 12 (1970) 102–117, reprinted in *Essays on the Coptic Gnostic Library* (Leiden 1970).

Christian. It was mainly in its missionary effort that Gnosticism appeared to be a Christian heresy. The truly Christian Gnostic works, on the other hand, such as the Gospel of Truth, the Gospel of Thomas and the Treatise on the Resurrection,[48] lack the typical mythological extravaganza and thus may have gone unnoticed. The heretical opinions and books refuted by the heresiologists are invariably much more grotesque and dangerous than these Christian Gnostic Works. It is likely that these books originated and found their use in a heterodox, gnosticizing, Christian environment which was not seen as a serious threat by the early heresiologists. They belong more with the apocryphal than the heretical literature.

With the likelihood that an important part of *Adv. haer.* I is based on earlier heresiological material, much of the burden of Gnostic sources has now shifted to the catalogue of all heresies which Irenaeus used. The Nag Hammadi tractates indicate that this source incorported some genuine Gnostic excerpts.

(1) The section on the "Barbelo-Gnostics" is based on some early form of the Apocryphon of John. In spite of the remarkable agreements in order and content, the numerous differences in detail make clear that the source of *Adv. haer.* I,29 could not have been identical with our Apocryphon of John.[49] At best I,29 is an abbreviation or paraphrase, although this does not account for the changes in detail, e.g. concerning the origin of Sophia and the nature of her sin.

(2) The chapter on Valentinus and his associates (*Adv. haer.* I,11) incorporates a piece of traditional material also preserved in Jesus the Demiurge (XI,*2*).[50] The Nag Hammadi tractate could hardly have been the actual source used by Irenaeus' predecessor but they share a common ancestor.

[48] The majority of Christian Gnostic tractates in the Library such as the Gospel of Philip (II,*3*), the Dialogue of the Savior (III,*5*), the Apocalypses of Paul, James and Peter (V,*2.3.4*; VII,*3*), the Concept of Our Great Power (VI,*4*) and the Second Treatise of the Great Seth (VII,*2*) almost certainly did not receive their present form until after the time of Hippolytus. This does not deny that these works often incorporate blocks of early traditional material.

[49] See *Die Gnosis*, I: *Zeugnisse der Kirchenväter* by W. Foerster with E. Haenchen and M. Krause (Zurich and Stuttgart 1969) chapter 7 where Krause discusses the differences between the Apocryphon of John and *Adv.haer.* I,29. Since there is a longer (II,*1* and IV,*1*) and a shorter version (III,*1* and Codex Berolinensis 8502) of the Apocryphon of John with numerous differences in detail between them, the text must have gone through one or more recensions.

[50] The original title, if there was one, has been lost. The title has been supplied by John D. Turner, the translator of the tractace. The common material involves the description of the Tetrad.

(3) The "Christian" part of the chapter on Basilides (*Adv. haer.* I,24) is found, with different wording, in the Second Treatise of the Great Seth (VII,*2*). It relates the docetic interpretation of the Markan passion narrative which has Simon of Cyrene crucified with Jesus standing by as a bemused spectator. Since VII,*2*, in the present form, is almost certainly later than the *Adv. haer.*, both must depend on the same piece of Gnostic writing.

(4) *Adv. haer.* I,30 does not specify the name of the sect in question.[51] Theodoret calls them Sethians whom he equates with the Ophites.[52] W. W. Harvey accepts the Ophites' designation – inspite of lack of agreement with Hippolytus' description of the Naassenes – since the chapter has two references to a serpent (*Adv. haer.* I,30,5 and 15). Nag Hammadi does not provide a close parallel to I,30, as in the case of I,29, but many of the details in this chapter are corroborated by such tractates as the Hypostasis of the Archons, the Apocryphon of John, the Gospel of the Egyptians, and other tractates loosely belonging to this group. *Adv. haer.* I,30 must be based on early traditions underlying these tractates.

With Irenaeus' heresiological source we have arrived at the first stage of categorizing Gnostic sects in terms of distinctive doctrines. To this source – or more specifically Justin Martyr – we can also attribute the theory that Simon Magus was the fountainhead of all heresies. The emphasis is still very much on the persons of the heresiarchs and their immediate successors. But it is asserted of these legendary figures that their followers organized into sects. The implication is that the unique teaching of the founder became the rallying point of a sect or school.[53] No doubt this was true for Valentinus, Basilides, and Marcion, but for Simon, Carpocrates, and Saturninus this may well have been an inference made by the Church Fathers. The important thing was that the pattern had been set for later heresiologists. The Gnostics were pictured as pathological system-builders, always breaking away from one sect only to form a new one around a newly-invented set of doctrines.[54]

No wonder then that each bit of heretical writing which became available to the heresiologists, and which did not conform in doctrine to

[51] The chapter simply refers to "others". It is clearly a continuation of the report on the "multitude of Gnostics" begun in I,29. The same is true for I,31,1–2.

[52] *Haereticarum fabularum compendium* I,14.

[53] *Adv. haer.* I does not specifically state that Menander, Cerinthus, Cerdo and Tatian had followers. However, Justin (*Apol.* I,26) speaks of Menander's disciples and it may well have been implied of the others also.

[54] *Adv. haer.* I,28,1.

the sects which had already been catalogued in the heresiological tradition, led to the assumption that it must contain the teaching of a new sect. Irenaeus' source does not yet assign names to the Gnostics of I,29–21, but later heresiologists are less restrained. To what proliferation of sects this led can easily be imagined.

A good example is furnished in Hippolytus' account of the opinions of the Sethians which he draws from a Gnostic book known to him as the Paraphrase of Seth.[55] This same system has been preserved in the Nag Hammadi Library in the Paraphrase of Shem (VII,*1*). Hippolytus' account is much shorter and must be based on an abbreviated and christianized form of the Nag Hammadi tractate.[56] Epiphanius presents an entirely different description of the Sethians.[57] Since in the account of Epiphanius, Seth plays a central role which is not the case in Hippolytus' report, his version has the greater claim to authenticity. It is likely that Hippolytus did not know the identity of the sect but assumed from the title that it must belong to a group called the Sethians. Had he known the work by its Nag Hammadi title he would most likely have created a new sect called the Shemmites.

The fact that few if any Nag Hammadi tractates fit into the heresiological categories has now found an explanation. The claim for the existence of sects and the distinction between them appears to be mainly due to the historical accident of what piece of Gnostic writing or information was available to the Church Fathers. Even when the Gnostic source itself is recovered, as in the case of the Apocryphon of John, the heresiologists prove to be of little help in identifying the sect. Their fatal mistake – and ours – was to assume that Gnostic sects found their cohesion in a set of doctrines which were expressed in their tractates. They took the Gnostic writings to be compendia of theology or credos of the sects. If the Nag Hammadi find has done anything, it has been to expose this misconception.

The individual writings show that the more Gnostic a tractate is, the more heterogeneous its teachings. The homogeneous tractate are the ones of which it is dubious that they originated in a definitely Gnostic environment. The Second Treatise of the Great Seth (VII,*2*) is a case in point.

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[55] *Refutatio* V,19–22.

[56] I have discussed the issue in greater detail in The Redeemer Figure in the Paraphrase of Shem, *Novum Testamentum* 12 (1970) 138, reprinted in *Essays on the Coptic Gnostic Library* (Leiden 1970).

[57] *Panarion* xxxviii,1–5.

If we take the Fathers' categories seriously, it is made up of Basilidean, Valentinian, and Barbelo-Gnostic material, not to speak of the parts which do not fit any known Gnostic sect or writing. This could still be explained as the use of parts from old systems to build a new one,[58] but the result is filled with doublets and contradictions. For example, the Treatise assumes the death of the Christ in one place and in another strongly denies it.[59] We must seriously consider the possibility that the author and the Gnostic readers may not have adhered to either position but instead saw some valuable spiritual meaning in both.

The same issue is at stake in the known collections of Gnostic writings, e.g. the Codex Berolinensis 8502 and the Nag Hammadi Library. The four tractates in BG 8502 have very little in common and could by no stretch of the imagination have been the doctrinal position of one sect. As a matter of fact, Carl Schmidt identified the final tractate as the first part of the apocryphal, anti-Simonian Acts of Peter.[60] The wide variety of writings in the Nag Hammadi codices has already been mentioned. It is not difficult to find passages in the Library which contradict every instance of what scholars have called typical Gnostic beliefs. There is not a chance that the unity of the Library will be found in terms of one Gnostic sect or in terms of a common theme in the tractate themselves.[61]

If there is a unity at all in the Library it must be found not in doctrine but in the ethical stance of the tractates. Particularly the non-Gnostic and marginally Gnostic tractates preach an ascetic morality.[62] God and the pious believer are contrasted to the rest of mankind with their lusts and concerns of the flesh. It is a morality of the elite, the chosen few, who order their lives according to the divine principle within them. Sexuality and womanhood are singled out as the epitome of evil – a tendency of

[58] This is the picture given in *Adv.haer.* I,28,1.

[59] Cf. VII 58,13–59,11 and VII 55,15–56,19.

[60] *Die alten Petrusakten*, pp. 13–25.

[61] T.Säve-Söderbergh has suggested that "the Library can quite as well have been brought together for haeresiological purposes, let us say by persons who like Epiphanius wanted to collect a Panarion against the Gnostics" (Gnostic and Canonical Gospel Traditions, *Le origini dello gnosticismo*, ed. U.Bianchi (Leiden 1967) p. 553). Yet not only do we not know of such collections but why would non-Gnostic books have been mixed in with the collection? Also why would the Library have been buried carefully in a pagan cemetery rather than having been burned after its polemical usefulness has been exhausted. Taking the Library as a Gnostic collection still creates the least problems.

[62] E.g. The Teaching of Silvanus (VII,*4*), the Sentences of Sextus (XII,*2*), the Exegesis on the Soul (II,*6*), the Book of Thomas the Contender (II,*7*), Authoritative Teaching (VI,*3*) and the Apocalypse from Asclepius (VI,*8*).

those who live in a monastic or semi-monastic, male society. All indications are that in this esoteric, encratic morality we have a dominant interest of the owners of the Library, one which influenced their choice of holy books and the way they interpreted them.[63]

The approach of the heresiologists to the Gnostic heretics still dominates Gnostic studies today. They are still being measured with standards that are appropriate only to orthodox Christianity. For the Church Fathers there was only one kind of unity and that was unity in doctrine, the *regula fidei* which was confessed by the Catholic Church throughout the world. For them there was only one kind of truth and that was propositional truth. With such standards it was no wonder that the picture of the Gnostics became so completely distorted. By taking the Gnostic holy books as credal statements, a gross injustice was done to the syncretistic, mystical faith of the sectarians. By taking the differences in mythological detail as doctrinal differences, Gnosticism came to look like an absurdly fragmented movement.

In reality, the Gnostic treatises are remarkably free from polemics against rival Gnostic groups.[64] At times several opinions on an issue are given for the benefit of the reader.[65] Clearly these writings do not state views with the intent to exclude others. This is foreign to the syncretistic mind. For those who are able to look beyond appearances, the truth is visible everywhere. The preoccupation with the Old Testament is no inconsistency in Gnosticism. For this holy book, which on the surface appears to be dedicated to the evil God of Creation, discloses true Gnosis for those who interpret it correctly.[66] Instead of expecting the Gnostic tractates to contain coherent theological systems, we should look

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[63] The encratic element is also important in the Acts of Peter which explains its presence in the Codex Berolinensis 8502. Cf. Hennecke-Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha* II (Philadelphia 1964) p. 275.

[64] Even polemics against orthodox Christians are rare. The Concept of our Great Power (VI,*4*), a late Christian Gnostic work, may have some anti-orthodox reference (VI 43,1–2 and 45,15–21). The polemical references in the Apocalypse of Peter (VII,*3*) appear to be directed against the orthodox hierarchy, e.g. VII 79, 22–31. More specifically, the Second Treatise of the Great Seth (VII,*2*) accused "those who think that they are advancing the name of Christ" of persecuting those who have been liberated by the savior (VII 59,19–32). A list of characteristics of the persecutors follows (VII 60,20–61, 24) which leaves little doubt that orthodox Christians are meant. Such a period when the church had become the persecutor instead of the persecuted could hardly have come before the fourth century.

[65] The Gospel of the Egyptians, III 60,12–18.

[66] Of course, the passages which are difficult or obscure for Irenaeus prove to be particularly clear ones for the Gnostics, e.g. Genesis I,26f.; 3,5.22–24.

at them more as mystical poetry.[67] Thus like poems and hymns, these works intend to suggest, to lead the reader to experience the truth. This can be done in a variety of ways. There was no need to express oneself in the same way every time. This is why no Gnostic book appears to agree with the next. Furthermore, this may give us a clue to the rise of this strange body of literature.

It would be going too far to claim that there were no Gnostic sects or schools at all. It certainly was not a unified movement. Yet it is unlikely that the Gnostic believer was self-conscious about his own identity over against other Gnostic groups. The distinctions Gnostics were accustomed to make were not between "denominations" but between the pneumatikoi, those who possessed gnosis, and the rest of mankind. How inappropriate it would have been for them to think of themselves as Valentinians or Basilideans! Nowhere in the extant Gnostic writings are these founders put up as examples, or are their words specifically quoted. Only the heresiologists had a motivation to "divide and conquer".

In conclusion, it may be useful to sketch what this may imply as to Gnosticism in general.[68] The literary remains give evidence of two parallel movements before Irenaeus which only slowly converged. The first is non-Christian Gnosticism as we know it, for example, from the Apocalypse of Adam (V,*5*), the Paraphrase of Shem (VII,*1*), and the Corpus Hermeticum. Whether it was pre-Christian in origin is another issue which need not concern us here. That this non-Christian Gnosticism came out of heterodox Judaism is becoming increasingly clear.[69] As such it must have been expelled from normative Judaism at the same time as the Christians, i.e. in the latter half of the first century. On its own it would have become increasingly syncretistic, absorbing some Christian elements as well as influences from popular Greek philosophy and oriental mystery cults.

Meanwhile a gnosticizing strain had developed within the Christian Church already in the New Testament period. This need not have been under the influence of specific Gnostic groups, for at this time gnosticizing

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[67] William Blake's poetic works, in my estimation, present an excellent instance of this kind of mystical, Gnostic writing.

[68] No attempt has been made to refer to the extensive literature on the subject.

[69] See especially the contributions to the issue by G. Quispel, *Gnosis als Weltreligion* (Zurich 1951), A. Böhlig, *Mysterion und Wahrheit* (Leiden 1968), R. M. Grant, *Gnosticism and Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (New York and London 1966), and G. W. MacRae, S.J., The Jewish Background of the Gnostic Sophia Myth, *Novum Testamentum* 12 (1970) 86–101, reprinted in *Essays on the Coptic Gnostic Library* (Leiden 1970).

was part of the "spätantiker Geist". The Gospel of Thomas and the Odes of Solomon are some of its non-canonical literary remains. Increasingly this amorphous movement came under fire from those who claimed to represent orthodoxy. By the middle of the second century the more extreme representatives of the group had been expelled from the Church and were driven into the arms of the non-Christian Gnostic groups. They took over the non-Christian Gnostic framework and mythologumena, and claimed that these represented the true interpretation of Scripture. These heretics continued to call themselves Christian, and as such exerted a powerful attraction on members of the Catholic Church who were inclined to a Gnostic or magical faith.

By the time that Irenaeus wrote his book against "gnosis falsely so called", a third stage had begun in which we see a blending of Christian heresy and non-Christian Gnosticism. Nag Hammadi tractates represent the whole spectrum of this process from crude christianization by supplying a Christian framework for a non-Christian tractate and identifying Christ with one of the beings in the mythology as in the Apocryphon of John, to a genuinely Christian Gnostic work like the Gospel of Philip. Only at this point can Gnosticism be called a Christian heresy.

In the final stage Christian orthodoxy had become so well established and possessed so much political muscle that it could put the Gnostic groups in various areas on the offensive and isolate them. The result was that the movement, now turned on itself, fell into self-destructive excesses, or was swallowed up by a new, Gnostic, world religion called Manichaeism.

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